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CHRISTMAS IN JAPAN: A CARNIVAL IN FLUX

By Jim Stentzel

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--eds.

Foreigners in Japan are well aware of the heavy commercialization of Christmas, but the Japanese Christmas also has a spirit-- a festival spirit, often like a carnival-- that holds a special but rapidly changing meaning.

This year, for the 30th time since the war, more than 90 per cent of the Japanese population is gearing up--or more precisely, is being geared up--to celebrate Christmas. Beginning in early November and continuing for seven weeks, the Japanese are being steadily immersed with Christmas carols, department store toys, Salvation Army kettles, white-bearded Santa Clauses, "How to Christmas" media blitzes, and the bright colors that surround Christmas parties, cakes and candles.

They will spend millions of dollars on gifts, decorations and food and then--go to work as usual when the day comes. It makes Christmas in Japan the biggest non-holiday anywhere in the world.

Japanese love to party, shop and exchange gifts, especially in December when year-end company bonuses pad the family pocketbook. They also love children and celebrations that focus on children. For these reasons Japanese have found it convenient to adopt and adapt the idea of Christmas as celebrated in the West.

Historians assure that the first idea of Christmas arrived in Japan 425 years ago with St. Francis Xavier. The idea of Christmas celebrations began to gain limited mass appeal just one hundred years ago. But for numerous reasons attributable to the U.S. Occupation, Christmas really began to take hold in 1945. The most obvious reason is that the Japanese were intrigued by what the flood of WASP soldiers and missionaries did on December 25. But imitation was only one factor. The Japanese also had their own needs, and Christmas was appropriated and filtered accordingly.

One need was for the color and gaiety of festivals, especially in the bleak post-war years when the Occupation GHQ took away many Japanese holidays (including one on December 26 which marked the death of Emperor Taisho and the ascendency of Emperor Hirohito). Many Japanese sought to

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escape the dark and cold loneliness of their dwellings on Christmas Eve by going to church--or more commonly to a bar or cabaret.

The Christmas Eve drinking bout became extremely popular with Japanese men in the 1950s. Approximately one million people annually crowded into bars in the Ginza district alone. They listened to carols, sang Jingle Bells, feasted on the decorations--and drank to the point of forgetting everything and everybody who had troubled them during the year. For most of these people, Christmas and *bonenkai* (year-end party) were one.

With the growing affluence and greater self-esteem of the Japanese since the early '60s, however, this pattern of celebration has begun to change. Dramatically improved housing and living standards, coupled with a heavy advertising focus on "my home" and "love your family", has recently turned the Christmas emphasis towards the home.

Also during the past decade, the style of celebration--especially the music and decorations--has become more sophisticated. What was endless repetition of Jingle Bells in the stores and streets of the 1950s has become well-attended, almost daily performances of the Messiah in recent Tokyo Decembers. What were 20-foot-high painted Santa Clauses have become 100-foot-high neon works of art on the sides of department store buildings. Christian art exhibits have also become popular at Christmas time.

Christmas may now be as enduring an institution in Japan as the department stores and media which gave it mass appeal. And yet the Japanese Christmas continues to change--some people say decline. Why? Because Christmas is a business as well as a season to be jolly, and both sides of the coin are subject to changing economic conditions.

Last year's oil crisis and this year's zero GNP growth are having a sobering effect on the Christmas spirits of retailers and consumers alike. Some Tokyo department stores didn't begin this year's *Kurisumis* sales pitches until November 8--two weeks later than usual. The pitches are milder, and sales slower, this year than in any recent year. In addition, there are signs that *oseibo* and *otoshidama* (year-end and New Year's presents) are getting a larger than ever share of this year's advertising budgets and company bonuses.

The Japanese New Year has always overshadowed Christmas in the minds and hearts of the people. New Year's involves an emotional and religious commitment which could be likened only to a four-day combination Thanksgiving-Christmas-Lent-Easter celebration in a traditional American Christian family. In contrast, the Japanese Christmas usually involves about as much commitment and meaning as New Year's in the West: most everybody participates, but few seriously ask "why".

Christ and Santa

The exception, of course, is the 800,000 Japanese Christians. For them Christmas is more the birth of their Lord and Savior than a commercial festival. Japanese churches continue to use the occasion to get this message across, but resistance is strong and there are still Japanese youth who think Christmas has something to do with the birth of Santa Clause.

One of the problems of Yule-tide evangelism by Japanese churches has been that many churches have insisted on rather sober religious services when the people were seeking gay, joyful release. Another barrier has been the clubby atmosphere of some small local churches.

In recent years many churches have tried to change this situation through *to-*, *shi-* or *cho-min* Christmases--"peoples' Christmases" which are usually held in large public halls. These diluted Christian services, focussing on Christmas carols, have become popular among Christians and non-Christians alike. They have also served to promote what little ecumenical church cooperation there is in Japan today.

An oft-repeated post-war Christmas story involves the Japanese who meets a Westerner going to church on Christmas Eve and expresses his consternation: "You mean you celebrate Christmas in *churches* too?"

Such a question is rare today. Most Japanese are not only aware of special Christmas candlelight services, but many attend them. The prime attraction appears to be the color, pageantry and children in the ceremony rather than any religious motivation. The appeal is so strong that even some Buddhist kindergartens have gotten into the Christmas act--if only on the Santa Claus, gift and party level.

Some Christians feel that Japanese *gung-ho-ness* about the secular side of Christmas represents an immunization against the deeper religious significance of the occasion. Some radical churches now boycott Christmas to protest commercialization. But these are minority points of view, and most Japanese pastors still see Christmas in Japan as a real opportunity for conveying the true spirit of the Gospel.

Surprisingly, many young Japanese can immediately tell you Christ's date of birth but stumble concerning Buddha's birthday. They can tell you who Buddha is, however, while usually not having any clear notion regarding the identity of Jesus Christ. Many Japanese are even more baffled by Santa Claus than by Jesus Christ. "Come down *what* Chirney?" ask urban apartment dwellers.

Although Santa Claus and Christmas trees are on the decline in Japan, charitable contributions at Christmas time continues to gain acceptance. The Salvation Army has become a Christmas fixture in even the farthest reaches of Japan. But it had a slow start during the Occupation when the military uniforms and the name sent not a few Japanese into mild shock.

One of the most popular Christmas customs in Japan today is nearly *every* father going to a bakery after work on Christmas Eve and buying a special Christmas cake for the family. Several dozen Japanese interviewed for this article were bewildered when asked where this custom came from. "You don't do this in America???"

Several of them suggested that the cake custom may well be the creation of Japanese bakeries and their heavy Christmas advertising in the past decade. They are at least partially correct. In fact there is a long tradition of home baking at Christmas time in the West. Since Japanese homes lack the required oven, the baking industry began capitalizing on this discrepancy nearly 100 years ago.

Candles are probably the second most important Christmas artifact in Japan. But here too the meaning of the candles bears little resemblance to Christ bringing "a light unto the world." In some rural areas, the candle on Christmas Eve has more to do with the winter solstice and to farmers' prayers for long hours of sunshine on next year's crops. In drab urban landscapes the candles mean just what they are--a bright spot.

Saturation Point?

One prime reason for the growing popularity of Christmas in the past decade is that half of the Japanese population has been born since the war and therefore has at least visually experienced Christmas since childhood.

Another reason is that many Japanese, particularly young women, hold a certain sentimentality about Christmas--the same kind of sentimentality which is creating increased interest in Valentine's Day.

While the Japanese Christmas continues to grow and change, the commercial side may well have reached the saturation point, only partly because of the increasing New Year's emphasis and the state of the economy. The Japanese are also showing increasing sensitivity about Christmas materialism and are tending to seek more of life's non-material benefits.

As part of today's new mood, there are signs that the younger generation is

willing to at least intellectually come to grips with the deeper significance of Christmas. When a professor at Tokyo Union Theological Seminary offered a weekend study retreat on the religious meaning of Christmas, he was surprised that nearly 100 non-Christian college students signed up immediately.

Perhaps the best way to explain Christmas in Japan is to say that it's all very Western in a Japanese sense. The Japanese have done with Christmas what they have done with other strange imports like Western political ideals: they have taken what they wanted (the basic form), discarded what they didn't want (the deeper substance), and added their own meaning.

Only in this way can we understand the report that Yukio Mishima, the famed author and dedicated Shinto nationalist who committed ritual suicide in 1970, stated in his will that a particular Tokyo department store shall provide annual Christmas presents to his children.

ORIENTATION PROGRAM FOR NEW KYODAN-RELATED MISSIONARIES

During the past year 23 new missionaries related to the Kyodan (United Church of Christ in Japan) have come to Japan. Five of these new missionaries receive their support from a North American church agency. The remaining eighteen are "contract missionaries", that is, missionaries whose support is provided by an institution in Japan, usually a Christian school.

A breakdown according to sending churches shows four Board-Supported missionaries from the Presbyterian Church in the U.S. and one from the United Methodist Church. Contract missionaries come from the Reformed Church in America 13 7, the United Church Board of World Ministries 2 7, the United Methodist Church 12 7, and the United Presbyterian Church 11 7.

Many are young people just out of college. However, a significant number have had a few years experience teaching or doing some other work before coming, some have come in mid-career, and others have come after retirement in their home country. One impressive thing about the group is the diversity of background and experience.

Why are contract teachers considered Kyodan-related missionaries? For some time many such arrangements were handled completely between the school and the individual. However, many schools felt that they wanted not just an English teacher but someone with a sense of Christian commitment and witness. This meant that they felt the need for some agency of the church to screen people, just as candidates for missionary service are screened.

At the same time mission boards in North America were looking for alternate forms of support and for ways to respond to many people who wanted to serve the church overseas for a short period of time. The two needs converged into the present policy under which any person recommended by a North American mission board related to the Council of Cooperation (COC) is screened like any other missionary candidate. In view of this, the Personnel Committee of the COC now recognizes all persons who come on a contract basis, and who are recommended by a mission board related to COC, as "Kyodan missionary associates".

Twenty of the new missionaries attended a recent orientation program at the Japan Christian Center. The program was divided into three major sections. First a three-man panel discussed the religious scene in Japan, particularly the Christian scene, the place of Christianity in Japanese society and the level of dialogue with other religions. Questions from participants on the Kyodan's situation and outlook for the future challenged the panelists to try to explain this complex situation to people with relatively little background in the history of the situation or characteristics of Kyodan. A lecture by Rev. Shiro Kawamata, pastor of the Myojo Church of the Kyodan in Yokohama, focussed on Japanese interpersonal relationships, using the concepts of *anme* and *tate*. Many of the missionaries with a few months experience nodded enthusiastically during the lecture, and the accompanying discussion was spirited.

Most of these missionaries will be English teachers in Christian schools, so the last morning was given to a presentation and panel discussion on teaching English in Japan.

--Bill Elder

SOUTH KOREA AFTER FORD'S VISIT

By Pharis Harvey

Pharis Harvey is secretary for Japan and functional secretary for Student World in the Board of Global Ministries of the United Methodist Church. He visited Seoul during the last week of November and filed this special report for JCAN. --eds.

A mood of uncertainty and anxiety prevails in South Korea in the wake of President Ford's November 22-23 visit here. On the surface there is a continued relaxation of restraints against the press and the political opposition. Behind the surface calm, however, Korea's democratic forces express new fears of a gradual but relentless tightening of repression. One prominent political figure predicted this winter will see more harsh measures than 1974, when Park Chung Hee issued decrees calling for death sentences for dissenters.

The cause of the uneasiness is President Ford's visit and the lack of any evidence that the U.S. government put any pressure on Park to ease his repression. U.S. diplomatic sources had indicated in advance that Ford's visit would have three characteristics: (1) a strong re-affirmation of security commitments in defense of South Korea; (2) no public statement in support of Park; and (3) an appeal to Park to ease up on repression.

The first occurred as expected, and has become a ritual necessity in U.S.-Korean communiques. This year's communique was stronger than usual, however, probably to make up for imminent aid cuts proposed by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Another explanation is that the U.S. wanted to make the strongest possible statement leading up to the current United Nations debate on Korean defense.

The third element may have been dealt with in the summit conference, but there is no visible evidence in Seoul. The second element provided the real surprise, however. Instead of avoiding identification with Park, Ford seemingly went out of his way to praise the "progress and economic development" of South Korea, implying that he now better understood the rationale for Park's policies.

This last point has caused ripples of discouragement and even despair among Korea's intellectuals and forbodes a strong wave of anti-American sentiment. Students in particular are expressing deep bitterness over Ford's unnecessary display of enthusiasm for Park. They see it as a signal that U.S. policymakers care little or nothing about internal freedoms in South Korea so long as South Korea remains a source of cheap labor and remains divided from the North.

The South Korean economy is being ravaged by inflation and material shortages, growing unemployment and bankruptcies. Even farmers are beginning to feel the pressures that urban workers have known in a year of declining real wages. The gist of Ford's visit--on top of the economic difficulties--provide a double-barreled form of depression for thoughtful Koreans today. One of the possible results of all this is that--unless there is some indication of U.S. support for democratic change soon--present opposition leaders may lose out to other more strident voices and to a situation of general chaos.

Meanwhile, major opposition leaders have begun a new campaign to revise the Yushin Constitution, Park's instrument of legal control imposed on the nation two years ago. The opposition points out that one rationale for the Yushin measures was diminishing U.S. military support for South Korea. Since Ford has now re-emphasized the U.S. commitment, the opposition says the need for the measures is gone. Seven prominent political and religious leaders issued a proclamation November 26 calling for a national effort to revise the Constitution. How Park will respond to this new challenge remained to be seen.

HEADLINE-MAKING EVENTS
Compiled by C. Koriuara

TANAKA RESIGNS -- Prime Minister Kakue Tanaka has announced his resignation effective as soon as his successor can form a new Cabinet. The resignation comes directly on the heels of a scandal surrounding his personal finances which plunged his credibility rating among Japanese to an all-time low. The scandal proved to be the last straw for the electorate and for policy-makers in Tanaka's own Liberal Democratic Party, already alarmed by escalating inflation and Tanaka's grandiose plans to "remodel" the Japanese nation.

"Japanese felt relieved at the announced resignation," says the *Nikkei Sangyo Shimbun*, an industrial and business newspaper here. However, the newspaper also reports widespread sympathy for the fallen politician. Most Japanese reportedly still see Tanaka -- who rose from a poor family to a position of wealth and power -- as a symbol of the Japanese way of life and values. The sympathy indicates, *Nikkei* says, that Japanese people are beginning themselves to doubt the value traditionally placed on hard work and success at any cost.

PRESIDENT FORD'S VISIT -- Japanese people have generally warm feelings toward the American President personally as a result of his November visit to Japan. They especially appreciated Ford's openness to the common people. However, at the same time the Japanese are disappointed because they received no frank answers to recent suspicions that U.S. military forces are bringing nuclear weapons to or through Japan.

BASEBALL --- has been making headlines in this strike-run-and-out-loving country recently. First the New York Mets toured Japan last month, playing exhibition games with Japanese clubs from Hiroshima to Sendai. Now "Mr. Giants," the nearly 40-year-old home run king and super-player for the Yomiuri Giants, has given up his bat for the coaching bench. Shigeo Nagashima will be head coach for the Giants, replacing Tetsuji Kawakami who has retired after a record-breaking coaching career. Under Kawakami the Giants won the nation-wide Japan Series Championship eleven times, nine times consecutively.

MORE STUDENTS TO HIGH SCHOOL -- Education in Japan has been compulsory through junior high school since 1949, but fewer and fewer junior high graduates have been leaving their books in recent years to enter the job market. This year, according to the 1974 spring census, for the first time in Japan's history over 90% of junior high graduates went on to enter high school. This means that the Japanese educational system can be called virtually compulsory for twelve years altogether.

STRIKE -- Employees of the Japan National Railroads, many private railroads, and telephone, telegraph and postal services here struck November 19, paralyzing metropolitan Tokyo and Osaka for 24 hours. Workers protested inflation, demanded the destruction of the Tanaka Cabinet, and opposed President Ford's visit to Japan.

WAR TO BE OFFICIALLY ENDED -- An official end to World War II between China and Japan has been hinted by the Chinese Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs. Recently in Tokyo to sign the Sino-Japan Marine Agreement, the Vice-Minister called for an early signing of the Sino-Japan Peace and Fellowship Treaty which will officially normalize relations between the two countries.

Although Japan and China opened diplomatic relations in 1973, a peace treaty concluding hostilities has not yet been signed.